

Sheppard Mullin Adds N.Y. Labor Practice Leader

Wednesday, May 28, 2008 — Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP has brought in a former Heller Ehrman LLP partner to head its labor and employment practice in New York as a shaky economy has employers looking to trim down their work forces and seeking out counsel with increasing frequency.

Jonathan Stoler joins Sheppard Mullin as a partner after spending about two and a half years with Heller Erhman's New York office. While at Heller Erhman, Stoler co-chaired the New York office's hiring committee and ran its summer programs.

Before moving to Heller Erhman, Stoler worked for Kelley Drye & Warren LLP.

Stoler cited the history and reputation of Sheppard Mullin, as well as its strong support for its labor and employment practice, as factors that drew him to his new employer.

"Sheppard Mullin has maintained a presence in the labor and employment market dating back to the 1930s," Stoler said Wednesday.

The chance to assume a leadership role and help the firm grow its presence in New York was also a strong incentive, Stoler said.

"The opportunity was tremendous for me to step in, bring my practice over and lead the effort in New York," he said.

While Stoler sees himself as an employment litigator, he also spends time counseling and advising clients so that they can avoid court.

The labor and employment practice at Sheppard Mullin is a core practice, and that's not likely to change as continued turbulence in the economy leads to more work from the corporate sector, Stoler said.

With layoffs and reductions-in-force becoming more commonplace, labor and employment lawyers are getting increasingly busy with both advisory work and litigation, Stoler said. And in New York, a lot of that work is coming from the financial services sector, which has been hit hard by reductions-in-force and layoffs, he noted.

While tough economic conditions and the attendant elimination of jobs has historically generated more litigation, employers are cutting down on ill will and legal liability by offering severance packages and getting employees to sign releases, Stoler said.

To the extent that employers are willing to offer employees those kind of deals and employees are willing to accept them, the exposure of the employer will be limited. But if employers or workers facing the prospect of losing their jobs won't play ball, that will lead to an uptick in litigation, Stoler said.

Sheppard Mullin has about 70 lawyers in its labor and employment practice group. Overall, the firm employs more than 520 attorneys at 11 offices in New York, California and Shanghai.

— *By Ben James, ben.james@portfoliomedia.com*